

CULTURE

M O N D A Y , N O V E M B E R 2 3 , 2 0 0 9

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[THE WEEKENDER]

'The Wilderness' tames Tianjin

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Over the weekend, Novel Hall (新舞臺) played host to Tianjin Renmin Yishu Juyuan's (天津人民藝術劇院) new production of *The Wilderness* (原野), a play by Cao Yu (曹禺), widely regarded as China's greatest modern playwright. The production has toured very successfully in China, and there were some outstanding performances, but the more than half-century gap separating the late 1930s, when the play was written, and this version's modern political and artistic climate, was almost embarrassingly evident.

Various well-worn modern theatrical devices were used, and some recourse was also made to the conventions of traditional Chinese opera, in which props are imagined rather than actually present on the stage. All this was part of a heroic effort to make *The Wilderness* seem contemporary.

Director Wang Yansong (王延松) has been too keen on bringing in all the tricks of the theater, both Western and Chinese, and their use often appeared inconsistent, suggesting that they were there more as trappings of modernity and artistic fusion rather than having been rigorously thought out as part of the production's structure.

In addition to the characters, lines were also spoken by a Greek chorus of primitivist clay dolls, a device clearly intended to deconstruct Cao's original narrative. Unfortunately, it was sometimes difficult to work out who was speaking the lines, which detracted from the effectiveness of this device. The excessive use of reverberation for atmospheric effect was not only annoying, but tended to give the production a slightly kitschy feel.

This said, there were a number of outstanding performances, most notably by Zang Qian (臧倩) and Li Shumin (李淑敏), who take the conventional dislike between mother and daughter-in-law to murderous extremes. Both are ranked as artists of the first grade, and their talents showed in a cast of energetic but clearly less experienced performers.

The cast members worked hard, but were undermined not only by the director's fussy mix-and-match presentation, but also by the material itself. Cao was among the first generation of Chinese writers to work in the form of Western drama, and for all the extravagant claims made for his reputation, he was not a particularly subtle exponent of the form. For that matter, even the superior plays of Western contemporaries such as J.B. Priestley when performed today, often also seem strangely irrelevant.

This production made a significant change to the ending of the play in an effort to provide some contemporary political relevance — this reviewer detected a reference to the moral trauma of a revolution that turned on itself — but this did irreparable damage to what passes for character development and made for something of an anticlimax.

For all the criticisms that can be leveled at this production, the high caliber of the acting was enjoyable and it was good to get a glimpse of what is happening in mainstream drama on the other side of the Taiwan Strait.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NOVEL HALL

Think globally, act virally. Like a cartoon thought bubble, that notion seems to hang in the mild afternoon air here, as school lets out early on parent-teacher conference day at Alexander Hamilton High School. At two o'clock precisely, students flood from a 1930s brick building evocative of Andy Hardy movies. If you are 130 years old, you will get that reference. If you are not, let's just say that they were Hollywood films in which perky and resourceful teenagers had a tendency to put on shows in somebody's barn.

And isn't the Web, in its wildly do-it-yourself essence, a technological update on the Andy Hardy narrative? And isn't this partly why the students hanging out on South Robertson Boulevard have become huge stars on the Internet, their fame conjured out of home-grown YouTube videos of jerking — a new dance with its own quickly evolving music and a style of dress?

Julian Goins, the 15-year-old leader of the Ranger\$, a five-member jerking crew, hops onto the tips of his sneakers — the Tippy Toe — and then swivels his body ground-ward, legs crossed at the ankle. He pops up like a jack-in-the-box, spins and bounces, gliding backward in the Reject, a move that resembles nothing so much as the Running Man, an 1980s dance-floor step but in reverse.

The other kids in the schoolyard pay scant attention to the star in their midst. Until his Ranger\$ schedule exploded and his mother decided to home-school him, Julian was just another student.

Goofy, gentle, nimbly amateurish, jerking was little known outside certain precincts of this sprawling city until a year ago. But in the last nine months or so, jerking began an unexpected run as an Internet phenomenon.

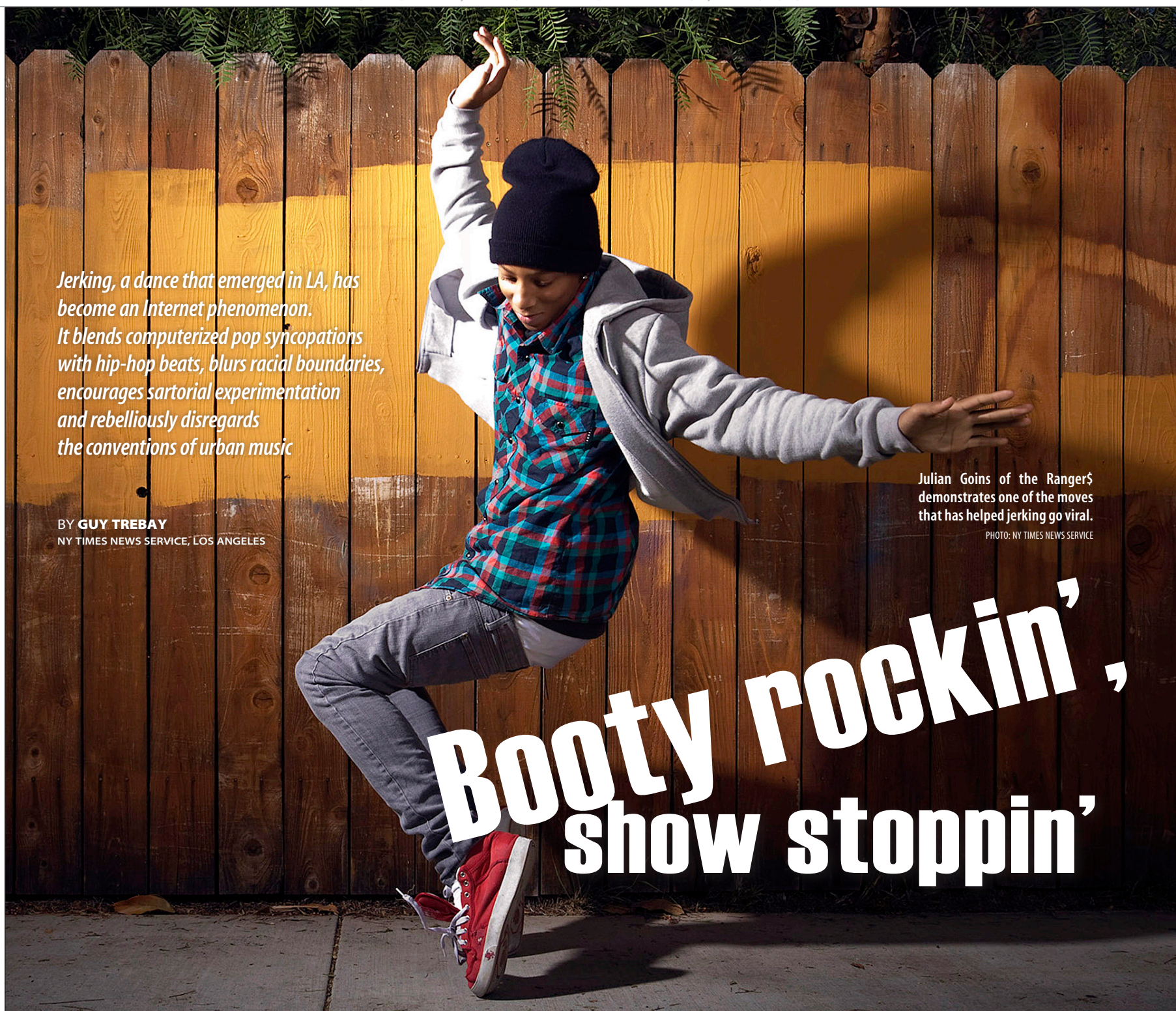
When the New Boyz — two teenagers who had been playing high school auditoriums — released *You're a Jerk*, the song raced up the Billboard ladder, sold 750,000 copies on iTunes and another 400,000 ring tones, provided the duo with a base for a national tour and, of course, gave rise to untold copycats.

"Jerking started off in LA as just a little inner-city dance," said one of the New Boyz, Earl Benjamin, 18, known as Ben J. "We used to search for it on YouTube and we noticed it had potential to be bigger than it was. It was like when you first saw break dancing: it has so many different parts, and when you get the dance down pat, you wanted to do it all the time. It reminded you of how fun hip-hop used to be."

Warner Brothers/Asylum and Interscope were among those that quickly signed jerking crews — the Bangz, the Cold Flamez, the Rej3ctz and Audio Push. In late spring, Shariff Hasan, 30, a filmmaker, began filming a feature, *Jerkin'*, simultaneously developing a documentary and a jerking reality show for MTV.

Sneaker manufacturers like Vlado got in on the act, sponsoring the Ranger\$, whose offhand way of mashing up fashion influences — punk, 1980s pop, skater culture, Daisy Age hip-hop and goth — breathed life into the weary proposition that fashion's most compelling innovations often come from the street.

Seen in formal terms, said Sally Sommer, a dance historian who teaches at Florida State University, jerking may merely be a cousin to the "lambada or the twist." It is certainly, Sommer said, less physically demanding than krumping or voguing or the other highly skilled and innovative urban forms of dance. But the lambada was a fad. The twist was a



fad. And jerking, its adherents say, has a cultural resonance that goes beyond the Reject and the Tippy Toe.

"Jerking is a movement, almost like in the 1980s when rap started," said Tammy Maxwell, the manager of the Ranger\$ and the mother of Julian Goins. "There's a style to it, and a music and a lifestyle and all the kids have really jumped on it."

Of course, it is altogether possible that jerking will live out its cycle and vanish as quickly as it appeared. But for the moment, there is no arguing with the millions of views the Ranger\$ and other jerking crews have racked up for videos and music recorded on bargain equipment and set to beats created with software that seems to prove that anyone with a laptop can be a star.

"Jerking is very ground up," said Todd Moscovitz, the president of Asylum Records, who added the Rej3ctz, the New Boyz, the Bangz and the Cold Flamez to the label's roster this year. "It's sprouting up everywhere you look," said Moscovitz, who noted that when the New Boyz appeared this month at a mall in Flint, Michigan, the police were called to control a crowd of 1,500 in a space designed to accommodate a fraction of that.

Teenagers there had apparently gotten jerking's fashion memo, the one that calls for skinny jeans, fat gold chains and T-shirts featuring characters like

SpongeBob SquarePants and Oscar the Grouch. Jerking, said Hasan, the film director, is "like this huge communal collage, all these teenagers coming together to collaborate."

It may be, as he suggested, that certain elements of this collage originated in gang culture, and that some of jerking's dance moves amount to little more than riffs on well-established gangsta steps like the Crip Walk or the Hoover Stomp. But the overall spirit of the movement is far from criminal. And its rebellious disregard for the conventions of urban style and music (old school hip-hop artists are referred to as "baggy daddies") is, as Moscovitz said, "the good, clean commercial kind."

Perhaps the most compelling thing about jerking, suggested Randall Roberts, the music editor of the *LA Weekly*, is how handily its practitioners manipulate the Web, scouring culture of historical context, freely deploying any tool that comes to hand. "It's like they're dipping back and forgetting that things like gangsta rap ever happened," he said.

There is much to admire, Roberts suggested, in the vision of teenagers of all sorts united in pursuit of a music that blends computerized pop syncopations with hip-hop beats, that obviously blurs racial boundaries and that encourages sartorial experimentation of a kind that, Hasan said, would have marked him in

high school as a hopeless nerd.

For Caesar Ruiz, one of the members of Team Dummy, a Latino jerking crew based in Long Beach, California, jerking at first seemed cordoned off from young Latino dancers. "We were like, we want to do this but we're Mexican and, not to be racist, but this was a black dance," he said.

But what attracted him to jerking, he added, were the same things that make so many jerking videos contagious: its fresh neo-punk style, its simple beats and the sense that anyone with a degree of coordination can learn the dance. "We just decided for ourselves that there's no color in jerking," he said. "If you feel it, go get it and show them you're straight with it."

Team Dummy altered its look from the oversize T-shirts and khakis that are standard issue in gang-dominated parts of Southern California. They began dancing and posted videos on YouTube, and according the mysterious Web laws that can send a laughing baby video global, these unknowns quickly attracted thousands of viewers.

Their online metrics, while respectable, were nothing when compared with those logged by the u.c.l.a. Jerk Kings, whose oddly titled *White Boys Jerking* has drawn over 2.7 million views, or the Ranger\$' *Jerkin in JerkVille*, which has more than three million.

As school let out last week, the unlikely superstars from the Ranger\$

preened their moves against the stolid backdrop of Hamilton High.

"Let's go mess with the Pink Dollaz," said David White, a limber 15-year-old Ranger\$ member with a winning smile and his nickname, Spotlight, tattooed across his abdomen.

White was referring to Camera and China Walker, 16-year-old twins from the Web, there is some mysterious alchemy involved. Ask the Pink Dollaz, astonished as anyone at their overnight success.

"When this whole jerking thing first started happening and it blew up, we were like, 'No way! Shut up!'" said Camera Walker.

"To be honest," her twin sister, China, added, "we really had no idea this was all going to get out."

TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

NOV. 13 TO NOV. 19



1 Jam Hsiao (蕭敬騰) and *Love Moments* (愛的時刻自選輯) with **20.47** percent of sales

2 Landy Wen (溫嵐) and *Dancing Queen* with **14.83** %

3 Elva Hsiao (蕭亞軒) and *Diamond Candy* (鑽石糖) with **10.09** %

4 Genie Chuo (卓文萱) and *1+1 Play n Fun* with **5.85** %

5 Yoga Lin (林宥嘉) and *Senses Around* (感官 / 世界) with **4.72** %

ALBUM CHART COMPILED FROM G-MUSIC (WWW.G-MUSIC.COM.TW), BASED ON RETAIL SALES

PLANET POP

Scottish singer **Susan Boyle**, one of the biggest stars of the Internet age, seeks to turn global celebrity into record sales this week with the release of her debut album *I Dreamed a Dream*. Named after the song from the musical *Les Misérables* that made her famous, the 12-track album is a mix of pop covers like Madonna's *You'll See* and The Monkees' *Daydream Believer* and Christian stalwarts like *Amazing Grace*.

Weeks ahead of the album's release, it topped Amazon's pre-sale charts. Boyle is the church mouse who roared on *Britain's Got Talent* last spring, turning the tables on judges and audience members disdainful that a woman over 25 blithe to the rigors of Botox should open her mouth in public. A viral pandemic on YouTube made the Scottish 40-something an international star. This is her dream come true, we are told; never mind that the whirlwind taking her from West Lothian to happy ever after has already landed this psychologically

delicate woman in a clinic.

This, then, is no mere bunch of songs; it is a commemorative mug of a major national event, rendered as a silver gewgaw that plays music.

Pirates of the Caribbean star **Johnny Depp** is the sexiest man on the planet, according to *People* magazine.

Depp, 46, headed a list of 15, catching *People*'s attention not so much for his swashbuckling antics in the *Pirates* franchise, or his freakish charm in *Edward Scissorhands*, but his softer side as a family man.

The "star has had women swooning since his days as a teen detective on *21 Jump Street*. Yet it's his devotion to his family that really makes the actor so endearing," *People* gushed.

Depp's companion is French singer **Vanessa Paradis** and he is the father of Lily-Rose, 10, and Jack, seven.

The slightly built actor who often sports a wispy goatate beard and floppy hair beat out 33-year-old actor **Ryan Reynolds**, costar in *The*



Jonny Depp, heartthrob and family man.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Proposal, and Jake Gyllenhaal of *Brokeback Mountain*.

Depp also won the magazine's "Sexiest" honor in 2003.

The Swedish soprano **Elisabeth Soderstrom** has died at the age of 82, the Royal Swedish Opera announced on Saturday.

She died in a Stockholm hospital on Friday morning.

During a career spanning half a century, the singer performed regularly at New York's Metropolitan Opera and Covent Garden in London, and made numerous appearances at Britain's Glyndebourne summer festival.

The Royal Swedish Opera said Soderstrom had "a unique ability to move the audience both through her voice and through her acting."

She would be remembered particularly for her performances as Tatiana in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and the *Marshallin* in Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*, the Opera said.

Her name would also long be associated with the role of Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust*, for which she won great acclaim with performances in the US and in the former Soviet Union.

Born in 1927, in Stockholm to a Russian mother and a Swedish father, Soderstrom made her debut at the city's Drottningholms Theater.

She continued to appear regularly at the Stockholm opera while pursuing her international career, and made her final stage appearance as the countess in Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* in 1999.

R'n'B singer **Chris Brown** was praised by a Los Angeles judge on Thursday for making

"extremely favorable" progress following his sentence for assaulting ex-girlfriend **Rihanna**.

Brown, 20, must now return to court in February for another hearing before Superior Court Judge Patricia Schnegg, who sentenced the singer to 180 days of community labor in August.

Brown has already completed 100 hours of community labor and undergone seven sessions of a domestic violence counseling program, his lawyer Mark Geragos lawyer told the court.

"It's an extremely favorable progress report," Schnegg said after reviewing a document detailing Brown's case since his Aug. 25 sentencing.

Brown was sentenced to five years probation, a year-long domestic violence program and 180 days of community labor after pleading guilty to assaulting Rihanna on the eve of the Grammy Awards in February this year.

The incident shocked the music world and left Rihanna nursing cuts and bruises to her face.

— AGENCIES